

The forgotten indigenous Papuan and New Guinean soldiers of the New Guinea Campaigns 1942–45

an address¹ to the Institution on 28 March 2006 by
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In this paper, Donald Ramsay highlights the significant, yet largely overlooked, role played by indigenous soldiers of both Papua² and Australian New Guinea³ in the Allied campaigns to resist the Japanese invasion and then to liberate Papua and Australian New Guinea from Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945.

Recognition of Indigenous Porters but not Indigenous Soldiers

Recently, in discussion with my Vietnam Veteran colleagues on the Royal Australian Regiment Association (New South Wales) Committee, it transpired that, while they were aware of the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy’ carriers, they were astounded to learn that indigenous Papuan and New Guinean soldiers fought in the New Guinea Campaigns of World War II. In fact, there were nearly 4000 indigenous soldiers enlisted as regulars in the Australian Army. They served in all the New Guinea campaigns, except Milne Bay, and they were subsequently awarded eleven Australian Battle Honours, the first of which was *Kokoda Trail*⁴.

I suspect that most Australians are also unaware of their proud record. For this reason, I feel sad each ANZAC Day when the media relates the sterling work of the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy’ porters, but *never* mentions the indigenous Papuan and New Guinean soldiers. At least, though, Australians are made aware of how indigenous people supported Australia in a time of crisis, sometimes at great risk to themselves. The famous photograph of Raphael Oimbari assisting the wounded Private Dick Whittington has also become

something of an iconic reminder. Another example of neglect is that there is no mention of the indigenous soldiers engraved on the war memorial at Isurava, a village on the Kokoda Trail.

There were something like 55,000 porters when those operating close to their villages are included. Some were volunteers, some were press-ganged, and some were deserters from the Japanese. Initially, on the Kokoda Trail, they were not treated very well – no pay, slender rations and no tobacco – until ANGAU (Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit) officers were appointed to look after them. In some cases, the absence of the carriers from their native villages created real hardships for those left behind. For example, if a village had a population of 100, 20 young men would be absent as carriers, with nobody left to launch the fishing canoe or chop down trees for a new food producing garden area.

Three Vignettes

Now to the soldiers – there was one Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) and four New Guinea Infantry Battalions (NGIB), three of which were operational⁵, by the end of World War II. These infantry battalions never fought on their own in battalion-size battles, for their strengths lay in guerilla-type operations, patrolling and functioning as scouts attached to Australian infantry battalions.

I would like to tell you of three unrelated episodes which shed some light on the character of these soldiers. Before I mention the first one, I wish to say that I agree with our President, Brigadier Carey, that

¹ Attended by 106 members and guests

² The Australian colony of south-eastern New Guinea

³ The territory of north-eastern (formerly German) New Guinea administered by Australia under a League of Nations mandate.

⁴ I prefer to use the term “Kokoda Trail” to “Kokoda Track”, for it appears as a Battle Honour as “Kokoda Trail” on the RPIR Colours, although both terms appear to be acceptable nowadays. I believe the Australian War Memorial prefers “Trail”, although the Department of Veteran Affairs uses “Track”, because Dudley McCarthy used “Track” in his official history. However, when the award of Battle Honours was being considered in the 1950s, if the senior Generals – Rowell, Robertson and Berryman – had wanted to call it a “Track”, they would have done so.

⁵ In November 1944, the PIB and NGIBs were amalgamated to form the Pacific Islands Regiment (PIR). The PIR was granted the title “Royal” after the Prince of Wales visited Papua New Guinea in 1984 and it is known as the Royal Pacific Islands Regiment (RPIR) today.

military history should be written by military historians. Neither of the authors of two recent Kokoda books recorded the following important event concerning the first shots fired at the Japanese invaders, the shots that indicated to them that they were going to be opposed.

The first batch of about 3000 Japanese landed near Gona on 21 July 1942 together with 1000 mainly Tolai carriers press-ganged from Rabaul. Following the landing, Lieutenant John Chalk and his 35 strong PIB platoon was sent forward on 22 July along the Gona Rot⁶ to assess the situation. He intended to secure the Sangara Mission as his base but, as he approached, he saw signs of Japanese occupation. The road from Gona to Sangara is more or less flat and the invaders had arrived on motor cycles and bicycles. That night he took out a small reconnaissance patrol to confirm his observations. He then sent a runner back to his commanding officer, Major W T Watson⁷, with his report. Watson sent back a hand-written note on a piece of cardboard saying "You will engage the Enemy". Big deal – with, by that time, forty 0.303 rifles and one Thompson sub-machine gun. Chalk, realising that his platoon would be no match for the advancing enemy, took up an ambush position on a hill in a local garden and awaited his opportunity. In Chalk's own words: "The Japanese eventually arrived, preceded by native carriers, so I had to hold my fire until the Japanese soldiers came into view. I gave the order to fire and the Japanese immediately swung into action with mortars and woodpecker machine guns." Hopelessly outnumbered by more than 1000 well-armed enemy, Chalk and his platoon melted back into the jungle to rejoin Major Watson. Captain Chalk died in 2001. Interestingly, one of the soldiers involved in this ambush was Private Paul Lafe. In the mid 1960s, Warrant Officer Class 2 Paul Lafe BEM was one of my sergeant-majors.

My second episode concerns the PIB in February 1944, when the enemy had been forced out of Finschhafen and were retreating over the mountains and up the coast to their base at Madang. Recently, Captain Frank Hawdon OAM, a colleague of mine on the Battle for Australia Commemoration Committee (New South Wales), told me that he had been the Signals Officer of the 35th Australian Infantry Battalion⁸ at this time. A few years ago he was granted access to the 35th Battalion War Diaries at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. They record that, in the period

13 to 27 February 1944, the 35th Battalion, by body count, killed 128, while the attached PIB company killed 309 Japanese. In this context, it is worth noting that PIR forged an alliance with the 7th (Duke of Edinburgh's) Gurkha Rifles in 1954 and it emerged that, in comparing ratios of kills, the PIR was ahead of the Gurkhas⁹.

My third episode concerns the late Major General Allan Murchison AO MC RFD ED, who was a member of the Royal United Service Institution for many years and who was the Commanding Officer of 2nd New Guinea Infantry Battalion in 1945-46. He told me some years ago that many Australian soldiers survived due to the quick reactions of the Papuan and New Guinean scouts advancing ahead of their Australian comrades. They had better traction in the mud of the jungle floor due to their big prehensile toes and they could smell the Japanese in ambush ahead. They would say to the point section or platoon commander of the Australian company "Masta Japan e stap" and what was a Japanese ambush became an Australian counter ambush.

Papuan Infantry Battalion

The PIB was raised in June 1940 in Port Moresby. All ranks were volunteers. Many were ex policemen from the Royal Papuan Constabulary (RPC) and the first 63 recruits were either ex-members or serving members of the RPC. Enrolment was for three years – the pay in year 1 was 10 shillings per month rising to 1 pound per month in year 3. Rations were in excess of the RPC scale and included butter and jam. The battalion's tasks were patrolling, reconnaissance and sharpening bush skills.

By early 1942, the PIB strength was 294 (224 privates) with Australian officers, warrant officers and senior NCOs. It is important to understand the soldiers were regulars in the Australian Military Forces. In March, the PIB was given the task of patrolling the coast line after the Japanese landed at Lae. Later the PIB was sent up the Gona Rot ahead of 39th Australian Infantry Battalion and, as recorded above, in July 1942, soldiers of the PIB near Gona offered the first resistance to the Japanese in New Guinea.

As the Kokoda campaign continued and during the series of delaying actions in the withdrawal, the PIB was engaged in felling trees and destroying bridges, including the wire bridge over the Kumusi River. With their local knowledge, guerrilla tactics were adopted and the Japanese were attacked on their flanks and rear. On occasions, the PIB assisted in extracting

⁶ The road was known as the Port Moresby Rot or the Gona Rot, depending on which way one was proceeding, and the postman came through every three weeks.

⁷ Major W T Watson DSO MC DCM, a miner and veteran World War I soldier, had lived in New Guinea for many years. He understood the strengths and weaknesses of his soldiers – essential in anyone who commands indigenous Papuan and New Guinean troops.

⁸ In February 1944, 35th Battalion, as part of 8th Australian Infantry Brigade, was clearing out by-passed pockets of enemy resistance in the Sio area (on the Huon Peninsula coast between Finschhafen and Saidor).

⁹ It should be noted, however, that the Gurkhas also fought in Europe, and the comparison quoted concerned Japanese dead only. It is understood that the Australian Governor-General, Field Marshal Sir William Slim, when presenting Colours to PIR at Taurama Barracks, Port Moresby, in 1956, said that he felt that there were many similarities in the martial traits of the Gurkha and soldiers of Papua New Guinea – praise indeed considering his background.

Australian casualties from the point of contact.

During the subsequent Australian advance, the PIB soldiers in their own environment were used successfully in deep penetration and reconnaissance patrols. Finally, in January 1943, they shared in the Australian successes at Buna and Sanananda. At this time, while some Japanese tried to escape using the river systems back to Morobe, the PIB inflicted many casualties on the enemy. In the confusion, a number of carriers of the Japanese escaped and some joined the PIB, including William Matpi – more about him later.

Before moving on from the Kokoda campaign I should like to mention the remarkable Sergeant Katue MM. During the withdrawal phase, he was left behind because he could not walk. As he recovered, he made his way back to rejoin friendly forces and he got some of the locals to help him in his exploits. When he turned up after two months, he tendered the insignia and badges of 26 Japanese officers and NCOs that he had killed, but none from privates, for they had nothing worth collecting!

Following their defeat at Milne Bay and Kokoda, the Japanese Commander-in-Chief, Lieutenant General Adachi Hatoza, developed Lae and Salamaua as fortified bases. To weaken Lae, the Allied strategy was to make a drive for Salamaua that would draw off forces from Lae. In February 1943, A Company PIB played an important part in the approach to Salamaua, while B Company helped to stop the Japanese advance on Wau. In company with the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles¹⁰, A Company got outstanding results as scouts for the 4th United States Infantry Division. In particular, once Salamaua fell, Colonel McKechnie, the 162nd United States Infantry Regiment's commander, wrote to Major Watson, Commanding Officer of PIB, stating his soldiers had amazing respect and admiration for the PIB's prowess and soldierly qualities, and without the PIB it would have been difficult to complete the mission successfully.

To obtain intelligence, some PIB soldiers were allowed to grow their hair, remain unshaven, stain their teeth with betel nut chewing, and then merge with the local villagers. One soldier volunteered to catch fish for the Japanese and they gave him grenades to stun the fish. On handing over the catch, he asked for some fish to smoke for the local villagers and while doing so he arranged four fires on the shore. This was a pre-arranged signal to his company commander, and next morning the Air Force bombed the Japanese concentration.

As for Wau – on Christmas Day 1972, standing at the top of the sloping airfield there, a famous Papua New Guinea senior administrator and first Speaker of the Papua New Guinea House of Assembly, Sir Horrie Niall, explained to me, as we looked down at the end of

the runway, that that was as far as the Japanese got – fortunately. Horrie went on to say that, at the time, it was thought that a German, a former worker on the gold field, had alerted the Japanese to a long-forgotten track from the coast to Wau – hence their sudden and surprise appearance. Also, at one stage, the strong room of the Bank of New South Wales was blown, to evacuate its contents to Port Moresby.

And so the PIB story continues with C Company landing with the 9th Australian Division at Scarlet Beach, Finschhafen, while A Company joined the 5th Australian Division on the advance from Finschhafen to Saidor on the way to Madang. Meanwhile B Company was assigned to 7th Division operating in the advance up the Markham Valley to the Ramu Valley. After these campaigns the battalion concentrated back at Port Moresby. In June 1945, the new 1 PIB worked with the 3rd Australian Division on Bougainville. In all the PIB had a life of 5 years and the fierce fighting exploits of its soldiers won much respect from their Australian and American colleagues.

New Guinea Infantry Battalions

When the PIB was being raised in 1940, Brigadier General McNicoll, Administrator of New Guinea was asked about establishing a NGIB. On the advice of a senior and experienced public servant who considered the New Guinean men would be unsuitable as soldiers, the proposal was turned down. As the New Guinea campaigns developed, however, this issue was re-considered. In 1944, with much of New Guinea free and more men available to enlist, the first New Guinea Infantry Battalion was raised in March; the second in September; and then these two battalions were amalgamated with the Papuan Infantry Battalion to form the Pacific Islands Regiment in November. Subsequently, 3 NGIB was raised in August 1945 and 4 NGIB (formative only) in January 1946, before the PIR was disbanded in June 1946.

When 1 NGIB was raised in March 1944, a much-criticised decision was made that the PIB would have Papuan soldiers only and the NGIB New Guinean soldiers exclusively. It was an unhappy time for the PIB as their New Guinean members were transferred to the NGIB.

In November 1944, C Company 1 NGIB relieved B Company PIB at Hansa Bay while A Company joined 3rd Division on Bougainville. At the same time, B and D Companies moved to New Britain and headed the parallel advances on that island. On reaching the line Open Bay-Wide Bay, defensive positions were adopted to contain the large Japanese base at Rabaul. In September 1944, 2 NGIB was formed and moved to New Britain where there was a problem that resulted in Lieutenant Colonel Allan Murchison being appointed to command. The battalion then joined the 6th Australian Division in the Wewak area and was placed under command of 17th Infantry Brigade in the Maprik sector. For the first time, a battalion of the PIR was used in set

¹⁰An Australian volunteer citizen forces unit, comprised of expatriates resident in New Guinea.

piece company attacks, with air and artillery support, as the battalion advanced towards the Sepik River. The most spectacular attack was carried out by A Company, under command of Major Ron Garland MC*, which resulted in the company capturing all of 2/7th Australian Infantry Battalion's objectives. This enabled the 2/7th to pass through quickly to sever the Japanese line of communications between their inland and coastal sectors.

3 NGIB, raised in August 1945, was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Fergus MacAdie DSO. The battalion had no active service, but played a valuable role in the confinement and repatriation of the large Japanese garrison in Rabaul.

It was a fantastic performance by the PIR – in action from July 1942 to August 1945, inflicting 2,209 killed-in-action on the Japanese while experiencing only 38 killed-in-action and 98 wounded-in-action of its own. The Commander of the Allied Forces in the New Guinea Theatre stated that the PIR contributed in no small way to the success of operations. Indigenous awards included four Distinguished Conduct Medals (DCM), two George Medals (GM), 15 Military Medals (MM) and three British Empire Medals (BEM).

The Aftermath

In dealing with the following sad episode in the history of the PIR, I must mention that Warrant Officer William Mapti DCM played a very prominent role in helping to solve what could have been an explosive situation. Previously, his daring exploits, leadership and bravery had become something of a legend. His personal tally of killing Japanese soldiers was 110.

When the first draft of New Guinea soldiers ex PIB arrived at 2 NGIB many were told that they would have to re-enlist because there was no proper documentation as to how and when they had joined the PIB – perhaps because they had done so informally during operations in their own areas. This new procedure was much resented by these experienced soldiers. Then, having worn Australian chevron badges of rank on the sleeve in the PIB, they were told that coloured bars on their lap laps would take the place of the chevrons. This foolish decision caused consternation and Sergeant Tapioli MM refused, saying that bars had been worn by sanitary workers on their lap laps pre-war. He said that he would rather drop rank – otherwise he would salute with his genitals. When the decision was not reversed, the soldiers became unruly and a newly joined inexperienced Australian officer who had shouted at them was set upon and ended up in hospital. Four culprits were sentenced to gaol for six months. Chevrons were quickly restored. It says much for Allan Murchison's skill on taking over an untried and unsettled 2 NGIB that he subsequently led a very successful battalion in operations behind Wewak.

The decision to separate Papuan and New Guinean soldiers and the chevron business were just the

beginning of the unrest in the PIR. In New Britain and in Bougainville, instead of operating in their well-trying and successful roles under their own Australian officers, they were farmed out in penny packets to Australian battalions and under command of junior officers inexperienced in working with the PIR. The soldiers became dispirited when an officer would say "You lot will man the perimeter tonight" whilst his own soldiers had uninterrupted sleep. Resentment built up as they realised full well that they were being paid a pittance in comparison with the Australian soldiers, and especially when they were eventually granted an increase of only 5 shillings per month. The problem was that a large increase to Australian rates of pay could not be sustained post-war, and no doubt this contributed to the PIR being disbanded.

With the end of the war, the PIR was concentrated in battalion camps on the Gazelle Peninsula and, unfortunately, ill-discipline continued. To defuse the situation, Sergeant Major Mapti arrived in Rabaul and with a Jeep and driver, he addressed each of the battalions in turn, telling the soldiers that everyone must obey the civil law now that hostilities had ceased and police instructions must be obeyed. It says much for his standing and reputation within the Regiment, that ill-discipline stopped, and so in June 1946 PIR ceased to exist. The Regiment's great reputation prevailed, however, and PIR was raised once again in 1951. The RPIR celebrated its 55th post World War II birthday on 3 March 2006.

The Author: Colonel Donald Ramsay, who was born and educated in Scotland, has been a member of the Institution for many years. He was commissioned in The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) in 1943 and saw active service during World War II in Italy (including the Cassino battles) and Greece. He transferred to the Australian Regular Army in 1952 and served with the Victorian Scottish Regiment and the Royal Australian Regiment, including with the 2nd Battalion in operations against the communist terrorists in Malaya (1955–57), initially as adjutant and then as a company commander. He served with the Pacific Islands Regiment twice. From 1960 to 1962, he was a company commander and then second-in-command of the Regiment, then a single battalion. From 1965 to 1967, he raised the 2nd Battalion and became its foundation commanding officer. The battalion was based in Wewak with responsibility for the border with Indonesia. He retired from the Army to lead Papua New Guinea's largest community-owned export-import company until independence in 1975 and subsequently served on the administrative staff of the Scots College in Sydney until 1994. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 2001 for services to international relations, recognising his contributions to both Papua New Guinea and "gap year" exchange programmes between British and Australian youth. Photo of Colonel Ramsay: Colonel J M Hutcheson MC.